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# Review Of "Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, And Transgender Participation In African-Inspired Traditions In The Americas" By R. Conner And D.H. Sparks

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Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-inspired Traditions in the Americas

Review by: Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks

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*Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-inspired Traditions in the Americas.* By Randy P. Conner with David Hatfield Sparks. Harrington Park Press, 2004. xii + 390 pages. \$29.95 paper.

This book is a recent addition to writings that explore gender and sexuality in African-based religions. *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* documents gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender/transsexual participation in

## *Nova Religio*

African-based religious traditions with data from interviews, ethnographic sources, and academic studies. Conner and Sparks explore the interrelationship of spirituality and same-sex orientations by looking at the experiences of individual practitioners, the prevalence of gendered manifestations of the divine, and homoeroticism in the practices, beliefs, and myths of the religions of the African diaspora, with an emphasis on the Yoruba-derived religions of Santería and Candomblé, and to a lesser extent Haitian Vodou. As gay men, insider-participants, as well as scholars of these traditions, the authors bring a multifaceted perspective to the sensitive and often contentious issue of the LGBT presence in African-based religions.

Homophobia, coupled with persistent discrimination against practitioners of African-based religions, has tended to foster a climate of secrecy among gay participants in these faiths. In the opening section of the book, Connor chronicles his own personal academic and spiritual journey, providing the rationale for his decision to undertake this project. One guiding issue was the desire to understand how “gay spirituality” has been expressed in “other spiritual movements and traditions . . . beyond Christianity and Judaism” (6). Much more so, the book is a response to the suppression of the voices of “queer-identified practitioners and artists” in African-based religions and an attempt to honor the same while historicizing sexual complexity in these traditions.

The questions that *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* raises go beyond a celebratory narrative of sexual orientation. The authors do not employ a lone methodological or theoretical approach, but choose to synthesize their conclusions about the relationship between same-sex intimacy and spiritual experience in a series of heavily annotated and excerpted chapters with titles such as “Divinities and Spirits,” “Children of the Spirits,” and “Snapshots,” the latter an assortment of portraits of devotees interviewed by the authors in the United States, Cuba, and Brazil. Among the general issues covered are: sex and gender complexity in African and New World cultures; divine androgyny; ritual transvestism; and the impact of HIV-AIDS on believers and their practices. It is not possible for the book to explore all these issues in depth, but Conner does a good job of distilling most of the current literature and highlighting some of the recent issues and controversies facing LGBT practitioners. His presentation of the debates over the prohibitions of the initiations of homosexual priests and priestesses in Ifá, for example, provides perspectives from both sides of the issue. Other observations concerning the dearth of transgender/transsexual and bisexual members in African-based spiritual communities—communities that revere androgynous and gynandrous divinities, including some *òrìshàs*—are noteworthy. The final chapter, “To Make the Spirit Manifest,” is a presentation of prominent writers, musicians and other artists involved with African spirituality who have embodied gender complexity in their lives and work,

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including folklorist Lydia Cabrera, musician Gilberto Gil, ethnographer Pierre Verger, visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, and others.

While *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions* is a welcome text that bridges literature on African-based religions, queer studies, and gender studies, some might find that its excessively partisan tone makes for uncritical reading. The book may be most useful as a guide and a resource, a courageous and sensitively written account of participants in New World African religions whose stories, for the most part, have been untold.

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